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Awakening

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Abstract

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Awakening

by Richard Mott

Journalism, Junior

THE jagged edges of the rocky terrain bite sharply into the still tender soles of my young feet as I run frantically to keep pace with the long, loping strides of my mother. The rest of the baboon troop is dispersed around us in systematic clusters that remain fixed in their relative positions as we travel over the rugged ground. The other apes are deployed in patterns that prevent the penetration of an intruder into the core of the troop, which contains the elders, the females, and the young such as myself. The strong male warriors that stalk the perimeter are the guardians of the troop, and the ambition of the young males is to someday be such a sentry, protecting the vulnerable members from attack. Somehow I do not share such aspirations, for I see the warriors as wasting their most productive years in servitude to uncaring masses of dependents, only to one day outlive their usefulness and become weak burdens themselves.

I am bewildered about the purpose of our journey, and I speculate on the likelihood of a better existence once we reach our destination. The elders say that our old home was becoming too accessible to leopards and that the fruit and insects we live on were becoming too scarce. So they say we must move on if our society is to survive. But as I look about me at the huge wave of brown fur that sweeps across the grassy plain like the dark shadow of a cloud passing overhead, I see no such sense of purpose in their primate eyes—only blind obedience.

Yet such allegiance is said to be necessary, for ours is an orderly society advanced far beyond the primitive cultures of other apes, and the individuals in it are taught to subordinate themselves to utilitarian functions devoid of personal

satisfaction. The wise baboons tell us that a structured society is vital to our existence, and that its restrictions act only in the best interests of the individual, for they insure his very survival.

So we live from day to day and from home to home, dependent upon each other and unquestioning of the roles that claim to be our salvation. These pre-determined roles dictate the order of dominance among the members of the troop. Only the old male chief and his immediate advisors are considered to be superior to the bulk of the troop. But their superiority is a false one, for I know that if we were to ostracize them, they too would fall prey to the leopards that prowl beyond the perimeter waiting for stragglers or outcasts.

These thoughts that run unchecked through my mind as we make this difficult trek both stimulate and frighten me. I know that I must sit patiently while my mother picks the lice from my fur with her long fingers, or I will not have a smooth, fine mat of brown fur surrounding my body. Yet I yearn to be free of her probing hands and to live in a parasite-ridden, mangy hide independent of her surveillance. I would be just as warm during the howling African nights that force us to huddle together in barren caves safe from the evil enemy.

For some reason I cannot help but admire that enemy, because the leopard stalks the night alone, free from the reproachful glares of his kin when he fails and free from their apportioning of his kill when he succeeds. He is surely a more noble beast who lives upon his own strengths and dies from his own weaknesses. As I am swept along in this indifferent tide, I must envy the independence of the spotted killer.

Ahead of us now rises the crest of the mountains that must be our destination. Night approaches, and we must reach the safety of their confines before we are plunged into darkness. Even our great society, efficiently divided into specialized roles, breaks into chaos when we are cast into darkness on open ground.

The troop gropes carefully up the slope, anticipating the warmth of the caves that dot its face. One of our com-

rades slips on an unfirm foothold and plummets to the rocks below. The troop moves onward at an even faster pace, for when they look behind to see his broken body, they also see night creeping over the horizon.

My family occupies a small niche when we finally reach the crest of the slope. Ours is surrounded by several other caves that are guarded by a warrior baboon who watches for enemies during the long, cold night. Any leopard foolish enough to venture into the cave would quickly fall prey to our collective strength, but some beasts are driven by hunger to attempt such a foray. Despite his ferocity, I respect but cannot despise that graceful beast, said by the elders to be the personification of evil in the universe.

While the others sleep, I crawl silently to the mouth of the cave and peer into the icy darkness. The cold wind brings a hundred animal scents bursting against my face, and I think of the variety of living creatures struggling for survival in the valley below. This same sense of the diversity of life forms reminds me of the uniform drabness of my own life, and I long to roam the savanna that spreads before me beneath an inviting blanket of stars. Then I notice the yellow eyes of Death glowing at me from the leopard's roost above a neighboring cave, and I retreat into the confines of the shelter. But my mind is set, and I have made the decision that fills me with an elated sense of destiny.

As the morning sun rises and life begins to move in the valley below, I awake to leave the security of the troop. The other baboons, suddenly grown bold by the light of a new day, ridicule me for my folly but step aside as I descend the slope. The warrior apes are insulted by my desire not to aspire to their exalted status, and upon my departure, thin lips part beneath their great snouts to reveal large canine teeth in a contemptuous scowl.

I know that my mission is probably doomed. When the troop resumes its pointless journey, they will most likely find my bleached bones scattered upon the dry ground. I set out alone across this untrodden plain, marveling at the animals around me as they stir in the early morning light. A herd of gazelle flees in panic at my approach, startled by the sight of a solitary baboon.